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COMMENTS ON "MIRACLES AND THE LAWS OF NATURE"

Joshua Hoffman

In his interesting and challenging paper, "Miracles and the Laws of Nature," George Mavrodes explores the controversial issue of whether or not Hume's influential definition of a miracle is compatible with certain equally influential conceptions of a law of nature. If I understand him, Mavrodes comes to two important conclusions. The first is that Hume's definition of a miracle is *not* compatible with a Regularity theory of laws of nature. The second is that a statement of a law of nature should be understood as being of the form, 'necessarily, $(x)(Fx \supset Gx)$,' where 'necessarily' is a modal operator of nomic necessity, and where the truth of such a statement is *consistent* with its being the case that $Fa \ \& \ \sim Ga$. In arguing for his second conclusion, Mavrodes draws an analogy between laws of nature and humanly legislated laws. He says that just as the existence of the latter are in a certain sense compatible with their violation, transgression, or contravention, so in an analogous sense are the former.

While I am inclined to agree with Mavrodes's contention made in the course of his discussion that the Regularity theory of laws of nature is inadequate, I do not share his view that the Humean definition of a miracle is incompatible with this theory. I will argue, instead, that the Regularity theory *can* make sense of the idea of a transgression of a law of nature. Nor do I find Mavrodes's second main conclusion persuasive, that the truth of a statement of a law of nature is consistent with the existence of a counter-example to the universally quantified material conditional in the scope of the nomic necessity operator. I will argue that on Mavrodes's view, statements of laws of nature are *weaker* than the corresponding universally quantified material conditionals, whereas, in truth, such law-statements must be *stronger*, not weaker, than the conditionals in question. I will further argue that a more plausible way to allow for the transgressing of a law of nature in conformity with Hume's definition of a miracle is to understand such a law as containing implicit boundary conditions. These boundary conditions specify what it is that makes these laws laws of *nature*.

Hume, it will be recalled, defines a miracle as an event which (i) is a transgression of a law of nature, and (ii) is brought about by a particular volition of the Deity. In his paper, Mavrodes concentrates on the first clause of this definition. He examines an argument put forward by Alastair McKinnon, who says that

"The idea of a suspension of a natural law is self-contradictory... [Natural laws] are simply highly generalized shorthand descriptions of how things do in fact happen..." (quoted by Mavrodes, p. 6) Thus, McKinnon assumes that laws of nature are reports of regularities, of how things actually happen. In other words, McKinnon assumes a Regularity theory of laws of nature. From this, McKinnon reasons to the conclusion that miracles are impossible, that is, *logically* impossible. So far as I can tell, the following is an adequate rendering of McKinnon's argument:

- (i) Laws of nature are merely highly generalized descriptions of how things do in fact happen.
- (ii) Suppose that a miracle happens.
- (iii) Then something in fact happens which is not consistent with any highly generalized description of how things do in fact happen.
- (iv) But of any actual sequence of events there is of necessity a highly generalized description. (McKinnon: "Hence, anything which happens, even an apparent miracle, happens according to laws...")
- (v) Therefore, nothing can happen which is not consistent with any highly generalized description of how things do in fact happen.
- (vi) Therefore, a miracle cannot happen.

McKinnon's argument as here rendered is a valid *reductio* of the claim that a miracle happens. It seemingly requires as premises only the assumption of a Regularity theory of laws of nature and a highly plausible Leibnizean principle concerning the possibility of subsuming any pattern under a general formula or principle.

After introducing this argument, Mavrodes observes that one may accept McKinnon's argument and retain some notion of a miracle, but then one must reject Hume's definition linking miracles to laws of nature. This is a course Mavrodes chooses not to take. Instead, he takes on McKinnon's argument. So far as I can tell, Mavrodes concedes to McKinnon that on a Regularity theory of laws of nature, miracles are logically impossible. But he challenges the premise in McKinnon's argument which assumes the Regularity theory on the grounds that the Regularity theory is unacceptable.¹

It is interesting to observe that if Mavrodes were right about the incompatibility of Hume's concept of a miracle and the Regularity theory, and if, as most commentators agree, Hume himself holds a Regularity theory of laws of nature, then we would be faced with the difficult choice of concluding either that Hume failed to see this consequence of his own views, or else that he did see it but

chose not to take advantage of it in his attack on miracles. This consequence of the McKinnon-Mavrodes position for the interpretation of Hume is not a decisive criticism of that position, of course, but it should at least give us pause.

I think it highly unlikely that Hume would have accepted McKinnon's argument, and, in my view, he would have been right not to do so. While I agree with Mavrodes that that argument is unsound, and also that its first premise is false, I do not agree that it shows the Regularity theory of laws of nature to be incompatible with the possibility of Humean miracles. There is something else wrong with McKinnon's first premise, something more basic than its assumption of the Regularity theory, and something which accounts for the apparent result that miracles and the Regularity theory are incompatible. McKinnon's first premise says that laws of nature are merely highly generalized descriptions of how things do in fact happen. But this is *not* what the Regularity theory of laws of nature ought to say. It ought to say that laws of nature are merely highly generalized descriptions of how *physical* or *natural* things, i.e., sequences of physical events, do in fact happen. Suppose that in addition to physical substances and things there are also spiritual substances, including God and finite souls. Then the conscious states of these souls are not physical events, and so their occurrences fall outside of the laws of nature in some sense. Furthermore, if such souls can by willing bring about changes in the physical world that would not otherwise have happened, then physical events can occur whose occurrences do not in some sense fall under any law of nature. I suggest, then, that a law of nature of the Regularity theory is roughly of the following form: ' $(x)(Fx \supset Gx)$, unless a spiritual being by willing brings about something incompatible with Gx .' I ignore here the insertion of the appropriate temporal indices, and I assume for the sake of simplicity that spiritual agents are the only type of supernatural beings that need be considered. The clause, 'by willing brings about something...' is itself causal, and is therefore to be analyzed in terms of regularities, in this case, regularities involving willings and what follows them. But *these* regularities, or laws, are not regularities or laws of nature, but laws of a non-natural or supernatural sort, involving as they do non-physical events and things.

If we understand a law of nature along these lines, then a so-called "violation" or "transgression," etc., of a law of nature occurs just when we have Fa but not Ga . This is not an occurrence which is logically incompatible with a law of nature, it is merely an occurrence which we could not have had unless some non-natural event or events had interfered with or disrupted the normal natural course of events. Hence, I agree with those, including McKinnon and Mavrodes as well, that strictly speaking a law of nature cannot (it is logically impossible for it to be) subject to counter-example. Where we disagree is over just how we are to construe the sense in which laws of nature can, in principle, be subject to transgression or violation. I have argued that we should construe the laws of

nature as implicitly having built into them, as it were, boundary conditions which state under what conditions we can expect certain sequences of physical events to obtain. Any theory of laws of nature which allows for the possibility of non-natural forces or influences should construe laws of nature as having such boundary conditions built into them. Thus, the problem of how a Humean miracle is consistent with the laws of nature is not a special problem for the Regularity theorist; it is a problem on any theory of laws of nature. If I am right, each such theory should solve the problem in the same way.

Mavrodes, however, appears to believe that the problem is a problem which is special to the Regularity theory. He therefore rejects that theory as the only way of solving the problem. He proposes that we take a realistic view of laws of nature, hoping thereby to show how Humean miracles can be compatible with the laws of nature. As I have said, I am inclined to agree with Mavrodes that a realistic or nomic theory of laws of nature is more plausible than the Regularity theory. I propose, therefore, to ignore those parts of Mavrodes's paper where he argues the superiority of the nomic to the Regularity theory. Instead, I want to consider how Mavrodes thinks we are to understand a realistic theory of laws of nature.

Mavrodes says that we should understand a law of nature as what is asserted by a statement of nomic necessity, i.e., as a statement of the form, 'necessarily, $(x)(Fx \supset Gx)$.' He then argues in such a way as to imply that this nomic necessity is such that the sort of statement just indicated does *not* entail that $(x)(Fx \supset Gx)$. It is then open to Mavrodes to hold that $Fa \ \& \ \sim Ga$ is compatible with necessarily, $(x)(Fx \supset Gx)$. In what sense, then, is a miracle (say $Fa \ \& \ \sim Ga$) a violation of a law of nature? Only in the sense that it is logically incompatible with $(x)(Fx \supset Gx)$. I must confess that I find it utterly mysterious how, on Mavrodes's view, $Fa \ \& \ \sim Ga$ can be logically incompatible with $(x)(Fx \supset Gx)$, but not logically incompatible with necessarily, $(x)(Fx \supset Gx)$. How, in other words, is the fact that a statement is nomically necessary supposed to *weaken* the force of that which is asserted to *be* nomically necessary? This is indeed paradoxical, for the standard and I think only coherent view is that a nomically necessary statement is *stronger* than the corresponding material conditional and entails it. Mavrodes does, to be sure, try to make sense out of this by drawing an analogy between laws of nature and humanly legislated laws. A law of the latter sort, say, that murder shall not be done, is, Mavrodes points out, logically compatible with there occurring a murder. Such a law might be understood as being of the form, 'necessarily, there is no murder,' where the term, 'necessarily,' means something like "it is a law of the land that." The obtaining of this law is logically compatible with there being a murder, even though the statement in the scope of the legal necessity operator (if I may call it that) is not logically compatible with there being a murder. The analogy with Mavrodes's theory of

how nomic laws are compatible with miracles should be obvious. But this analogy is seriously flawed, for the legislative law-statement is not a genuine statement at all but a mere imperative. In other words, a legislative law is not a descriptive statement like a law of nature. It is this difference alone which accounts for the fact that an occurrence can be logically compatible with the legislative law but not with the embedded categorical statement. In effect, the legislative necessity operator weakens the embedded statement by converting it from a statement to an imperative. The nomic necessity operator has, of course, no such function. Thus, the analogy between legislative laws and laws of nature does not hold up.

What I have argued implies, I think, that the possibility of reconciling laws of nature and Humean miracles depends first on our being able to draw a distinction between the natural course of events and a course of events in which the supernatural, and specifically the divine, intervenes. It depends, secondly, on our understanding laws of nature as asserting only what happens without exception or what must happen in the natural course of events. But it appears that on certain views of the nature of reality, it is not clear that the distinction between the natural course of events and a course of events in which the supernatural intervenes can be drawn in the way required by our reconciling project. Obviously, someone who regards spiritual beings and forces as impossible will regard Humean miracles as impossible. Not so obviously, certain anti-materialist systems may be forced to the same conclusion. For example, consider Berkeley's system, where every "physical" event is caused by God, and where physical objects have no inner dispositions of their own (ideas being utterly passive). Does not the domain of the natural in this scheme fall completely under the domain of the supernatural? And if so, must it not be the case on Hume's definition either that every physical event is miraculous, or else that no such event is? One could try to define a miracle in Berkeley's system as a highly unusual effect of God's will, or as a deviation from God's habitual willings, etc., but this raises the serious problem of distinguishing the highly unusual from the miraculous. Furthermore, why does the miraculous need to be highly unusual? Hume's definition of a miracle is quite consistent with the occurrence of miracles being regular and patterned (though it may not be consistent with some of the things Hume says in his epistemological attack on miracles). It might be thought that Leibniz tried to solve this very problem in his *Discourse on Metaphysics*, but the solution does not seem to me to conform to Hume's definition. I'm not certain that there is no reconciling the possibility of a Humean miracle with Berkeley's metaphysics, but as yet I see no way to do so. But even if I am right, this no more tends to show that there is something defective about Hume's definition than does its incompatibility with certain strong materialist world-views.

NOTE

1. Mavrodes is not alone in thinking that the possibility of miracles on Hume's definition is incompatible with the Regularity theory. Both Antony Flew (*Hume's Philosophy of Belief*) and J.C.A. Gaskin (*Hume's Philosophy of Religion*) argue along similar lines.